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The (Un)Making of Respectability

In November 2018, on a rain-soaked Saturday, a slight nervousness seized me as I entered the weekend Qurʾanic school in Bordeaux, France. The teacher, Dalil, a middle-aged imam born in Mauritania, had invited me to present my research to a classroom of teenagers, a rather unusual exercise for me. Stepping into the class, I could hear Dalil lecturing about *ʿibādāt* – the duties of worship incumbent on all Muslims. The class was set up in the mosque's library, in a room filled with books: quiz games about Islamic history, schoolbooks introducing the basic tenets of Islam – *Learning My First Surahs*, *The Good Behavior of the Small Muslim* – and some classics of the Islamic canon. A rack displayed an eye-catching collection of photographs entitled *The Art of Integration*: portraits of successful British Muslims – a lawyer, a banker, some Oxford and Cambridge students – all of them embodying the elite achievements expected from students.

Welcoming me with his usual friendliness, Dalil pulled up a chair beside him: "Margot is a researcher in social sciences and has done some work on Islam in France. She has spent time in our mosque, so I invited her to discuss what she thinks of Islam, of the Muslim youth and of our work in Bordeaux." After a ten-minute open conversation on the sociology of Islam, Dalil interrupted me to make clear what he considered the core of his Muslim activism:

> Here, we are not in a logic of confrontation, of demand [*revendication*], of opposition to mainstream society. All this fuss around Islamophobia, what we call in Bordeaux an identity Islam [*islam identitaire*]. Rather, we encourage Muslims to peacefully integrate into a society that remains deeply attached to its Christian identity. That's why we're having an interreligious dialogue with Christians next week.[1]

[1] Fieldnotes (Al-Huda mosque), November 2018, Bordeaux.

Whispering and shrugging their shoulders in disapproval, students seemed to disagree with their teacher's critique of anti-Islamophobia struggles – a critique that I had heard him give quite often in class. All the detractors were French-born teenagers of North African origin, the majority girls. Despite the defiant atmosphere, Dalil, dressed in his customary navy-blue suit, persisted by further characterizing what he meant by an acculturated Islam:

> Something that we try to do here, in Bordeaux, is to tear Islam away from the cultures of origin [*arracher l'islam aux cultures d'origine*]. Islam and Muslims, we keep repeating, have nothing to do with Arabs. It [being Muslim] has nothing to do with North Africa. It has nothing to do with Palestine. [Pausing, then addressing students with an authoritative tone] You're French. You're in the third or the fourth generation and it doesn't make any sense to speak of Maghrebi origins to describe yourself!

At this point, students expressed fervent objections. "For me, it *does* make sense," several of them exclaimed, challenging their teacher's judgment regarding their own sense of belonging. Dalil demanded quiet and, as I made my way to my usual point of observation at the back of the classroom, shifted the conversation back to the class topic: *ʿibādāt*, the rules governing acts of devotion in Islam, and in particular the jurisprudence on how to correctly perform *ṣalāt*, the five daily prayers that constitute the second pillar of Islam.

With this intervention, Dalil was rehearsing a cycle observable time and again among Muslim leaders in French society: the critique of a victim mentality regarding Islamophobia; the distancing from contentious topics such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; the promotion of compromise and patience over "confrontation" and "opposition"; the call for interfaith dialogue; and the disconnection of Islam from home countries to better re-encode it in French cultural markers.

Younger generations like Dalil's students may be skeptical of such a politically sanitized project of acculturation. But as French Muslims maneuver their way in uncertain environments, the moves become familiar. In the face of intense scrutiny, community leaders encourage coreligionists to pass unnoticed, avoiding any flamboyant religiosity but cultivating their inner faith and observance of deeds. In the face of social exposure, they engage in routine practices of appeasement, abstaining from political fuss yet promoting orthodox forms of piety. In the face of Islamophobic assaults, they push for nonvocal ways of managing stigma and claiming respect, in accordance with the Prophet Muhammad's model of patience. This code of conduct, grounded in Islamic norms of

appropriateness, reflects their deep-seated concern about not sticking out. It is further enacted in the ways they dress – wearing suits for men (like Dalil's navy outfit) or modest yet fashionable pieces of clothing for women – and in the ways they behave in public, purposely avoiding being loud in the street, smiling at strangers, and enacting small gestures of courtesy. All these moves draw the contours of what I call a "discreet Islam": the self-conscious packaging of faith as a social virtue that sets aside practices likely to disturb the secular gaze.

This book recounts the story of discreet Islam not from the perspective of the powers-that-be and non-Muslim authorities but from the perspective of Muslims themselves. Amid the vibrant tradition of research on Muslims' constrained agency in European contexts – looking at subjectivities shaped by secular-liberal binds – one path of action embraced by pious Muslims has remained hitherto unstudied.[2] This book examines French Muslim leaders' praxis of self-restraint, politeness, and discretion in light of the increasingly regulatory regimes of republican secularism. It shows how their everyday acts of piety index the crafting of a discreet Islam, geared toward appeasing tensions around Muslim presence in France and bringing about justice and respect for Muslim citizens. These self-limiting forms of political claims should be understood as their *politics of respectability*.

To be clear, the idea is not to pretend that a more truculent Muslim identity politics qualifies as genuine resistance to stigma while respectability politics equates to quiescent docility. Discreet Islam bears ambivalent political implications, exemplifying how social conformance can concurrently destabilize and reproduce dominant norms. Rather, my ambition is to pay attention to yet understudied forms of expressiveness: discretion, good behavior, and courtesy – all types of micro-practices that sit uncomfortably in the study of marginalized groups and challenge the visibility/invisibility paradigm.

DISCREET ISLAM

The discreet Islam embraced by French Muslims needs to be understood in light of both the intensity of religious beliefs and practices among Muslim populations in Europe (Drouhot 2021) and the severe scrutiny to

[2] To highlight a few of these stimulating works: Bowen (2010); Fernando (2014); Jouili (2015); Özyürek (2015); Beaman (2017); Parvez (2017); Rogozen-Soltar (2017); Becker (2021); Esmili (2021); Karimi (2023).

which these populations are exposed. Muslimness is increasingly posited as a form of incommensurable difference in French society and in Europe more generally – an incommensurable difference in need of control and regulation. Despite different traditions of religious regulation and citizenship models (Brubaker 1992; Fetzer and Soper 2005), Western European countries have converged in their policy approach toward Islam. This convergence takes the form of intensified state interventionism in Muslim affairs, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and rising anxieties about a diffuse Islamic threat. This growing interventionism reflects the more or less explicit ambition to domesticate Islam along liberal and secular lines. On the incentive side, the encouragement of liberal Islam is channeled through the institutionalization of representative Islamic bodies, the support for pro-government Muslim leaders, and the training of compliant imams (Laurence 2012). On the coercive side, the discouragement of illiberal Islam translates into the expansion of police powers and anti-terrorist justice, the tightening of immigration controls toward imams, and the increase in mosque surveillance (Fadil et al. 2019). These overlapping acts of incitement and surveillance also lead to a range of exclusionary laws banning headscarves and face veils, testifying to the gendered impulse behind secular governmentality.

In essence, this process of encouragement and discouragement rests upon the distinction between "good" and "bad" Muslims: Symbolic boundaries are constantly drawn in public conversations between moderate, modern practices and extremist, backward ones.[3] At the core of this differential attempt is the ambition to make Islam compatible with secular and liberal mores – in a word, to devise what has been called a civil Islam (Peter 2006b). The contours of this culturally acceptable Islam are negotiated along various lines: independence from foreign influence (Laurence 2012), a restricted visibility of Islamic markers (Göle 2011), and the call for a theological *aggiornamento* of Islam that would espouse liberal ideals of freedom of speech, gender equality, and sexual freedom (Amir-Moazami 2011). All these prescriptions aim at fashioning loyal Muslim citizens who are attuned to the "community of value" that now conditions national belonging (Anderson 2013). These developments fall in line with the broader turn toward a culturalization of citizenship in

[3] Mamdani (2004) has traced what he calls the pervasiveness of culture talk in American public conversations about Islam. See Birt (2006) for a similar discussion about Europe and the binary categories used to contrast who counts as a "good Muslim" and who does not.

European politics (Slootman and Duyvendak 2015), resulting in the affirmation of shared cultural norms against assigned others (migrants, foreigners, refugees, etc.). In this framework, immigrant-origin individuals are turned into "guardians of good citizenship" (Anderson 2013: 6) and need to prove their adherence to so-called progressive ideals. Here exclusionary and inclusionary practices are tightly intermingled, with minority members being ostensibly included in the liberal nation-state but never as full citizens.

Among European countries, France is at the forefront of pushing an assimilationist agenda toward civil Islam. Indebted to deep-rooted colonial legacies, French republicanism was built against the backdrop of a singular regime of secularism called *laïcité*. This doctrine originally asserts the autonomy of the political realm from the Church, the privatization of religion, and a universalist nation-state that transcends individual identities. Controversies about the public visibility of Islam challenged the ideals upon which *laïcité* relied: Religious signs came to be perceived as encroaching upon the neutral public sphere, Islamic prescriptions were seen as undermining citizens' autonomy, and demands for cultural recognition were understood as impairing national identity (Laborde 2008). Gaining momentum since the late 1980s, these debates prompted state authorities to tighten their administrative and financial grip over Muslim institutions in order to promote, in the words of a former French interior minister, a "civic Islam, deeply committed to the Republic's values."[4] The subsequent distinction between "bad" and "good" Muslims had repercussions across a range of policy issues such as mosque construction (Frégosi 2006), the training of imams (Jouanneau 2013), the institutionalization of Islamic consultative bodies (Laurence 2012), and restrictive citizenship rights (Hajjat 2012).

In line with the project of cultivating and governing republican bodies, the French government also adopted a series of restrictive dress codes that ban the hijab and other "ostentatious" religious signs from various public and professional spaces: the 2004 law on religious symbols in public schools; the 2009 law on the niqab and other forms of face covering in public spaces; and the 2011 law on religious neutrality in childcare (Hennette-Vauchez and Valentin 2014; Karimi 2023). These pieces of legislation, largely supported by the general public, reflect the expansion

[4] Address by Bernard Cazeneuve, "Il faut construire une nouvelle étape pour l'islam de France," official website of the French government, December 15, 2016, www.gouvernement.fr/il-faut-construire-une-nouvelle-etape-pour-l-islam-de-france.

of the state control of religion into more and more domains of everyday life. In the fall of 2020, the French government went a step further by announcing a new law against religious separatism (Bounaga 2023). The law aimed at "defending the Republic and its values" and combating "radical Islamism," which was accused of undermining the country's universalist ideals (especially gender equality and the rejection of public expressions of religion) and creating a "parallel society" fueling terrorism. Proposed a few weeks after the brutal killing of a schoolteacher by a Muslim extremist, the measures included the close monitoring of mosques and their sources of funding, a state-sponsored program for French imams, the banning of home schooling, and strict oversight of municipalities deemed too accommodating to religious minorities (for instance, by allowing women-only hours at public swimming pools). The law reactivated the question that John Bowen (2010: 5) asked more than a decade ago in his ethnography of French Islam: "How far will the French state go in requiring not just obedience to the law and correct public comportment, but assimilation to a particular set of (post-) Christian practices and values?" The sixty-six Muslim activists I interacted with over the course of three years of immersive fieldwork had to deal with these restrictive scripts conditioning Muslim belonging.

CAN POLITENESS BE POLITICAL?

Ubiquitous in European Muslim communities, practices of discretion and self-restraint tell us about the complicated relationship between social change and behavioral conformance. And yet such practices remain largely understudied. The tendency in the study of Islam in Europe is to romanticize Muslims' attitudes in the face of stigma and assimilationist pressures. Scholars have paid much attention to a kind of in-your-face Muslim politics, whether that be the expression of hyper-visible piety (Inge 2017; Féo 2020) or the emergence of Muslim youth lifestyles (Boubekeur 2007; Tarlo 2010). In line with this focus on Muslim identity politics, other scholars have studied "loud" mobilizations designed to claim recognition and equality (Talpin et al. 2017; Elshayyal 2020). In these instances, political actors insist on acting and speaking *as Muslims*, with their claims to respect being articulated as claims to Muslim difference. They also tend to deploy conventional protest action such as demonstrations, sits-in, or the resort to legal contention – a repertoire that renders them *vocal*, expressing their opinions however contentious. They fit the general definition of what a social movement does, with its

connotations of strident politics that frame Muslim expressiveness primarily through the lens of resistance and dissent.

This approach overlaps with what some of my interlocutors label, with derogatory overtones, an "identity Islam," one that seeks recognition through contestation and is premised on ontological constellations – minority against majority as stable, bounded homogeneous blocs. In some ways, researching clear-cut identity mobilizations is quite straightforward, as they precisely aim at visibilization, explicit political statements, and direct engagement with the state. However, other forms of expressiveness get overlooked in the process: those characterized by ambiguity and indirectness, and those relying on unassuming gestures, humility, and unobtrusiveness (Sprengel 2020: 209). It is precisely these smaller gestures, not tied to overtly political demands, that we must examine. What is the political value of the everyday practices of discretion and self-restraint in which some French Muslims heavily invest? How can we account for claims to respect that do not directly cover traditional forms of political engagement but are rather grounded in good manners, politeness, and other prosaic forms of social distinction (dress, demeanor, intonations of voice, etc.)? To what extent is cultivating dispositions for hard work and educational success part of a broader project of community uplift?

Looking at more ordinary – and less stable – forms of embodied religiosity, a second strand of research has examined subject formation within Islamic revival movements in Europe. Contrary to the just-mentioned clear-cut mobilizations of identity Islam, these scholars have paid attention to muddier forms of political praxis, attending to the contingencies of pious Muslims' political engagement. The claims to equal citizenship they uncovered are expressed in mundane gestures: the expression of injustices through music styles (Göle 2017), the refusal of integrationist vocabulary in everyday life ("What am I integrating into? I'm French!" exclaims Chiraz in Fernando 2014: 50), and the wearing of religious markers in public spaces. In this framework, Muslims are presented as creative nonconformists, unsettling dominant secular-republican assumptions and inhibiting the intricate entanglements between pursuing a pious lifestyle, negotiating national belonging, and managing the Muslim stigma.

The lexicon of novelty infuses this scholarship, pointing to "new ways [for Muslims] of being in the world" (Liberatore 2017: 4), "new modes of ethical and political engagement" (Fernando 2014: 6), "new types of 'Islamhood'" (Boubekeur 2007: 77) or "a new public culture

in which ordinary Muslims are the creative actors" (Göle 2017: xvi). In these analyses of religious visibility, scholars tend to contrast the innovative nonconformism of new generations of worshippers – and their critique of secular governmentality – with the politeness and self-effacing practices of first-generation Muslims. "Unlike the first generation of migrant workers who were happy to discreetly confine their faith to their homes and places of work, to the factories on the urban periphery, today, new Muslim citizens display their religiousness publicly" (Göle 2017: 97). This is also what Fernando (2014: 40) suggests, building on Sayad's (2004) notion of politeness: "Unlike their parents and the Beur generation, members of the JMF [Jeunes musulmans de France] and UJM [Union des jeunes musulmans] and like-minded Islamic revivalists refuse to attenuate, as Sayad put it, the distinctive signs that make them stand out." In this view, practices that relegate Muslimness to the private sphere are primarily read as parts of assimilation projects, being implicitly posited as tied to disciplinary regimes of secularism.

This second perspective is closer to mine as it moves away from a strict focus on adversarial identity politics and pays attention to unassuming yet politically charged practices – that is, everyday life conduct considered to be the groundwork for both subjective transformations and social changes (Haenfler et al. 2012). This perspective also rightly locates politeness into wider power structures, with discreet Islam making sense in the context of heavy surveillance and regulation of Muslim bodies. That being said, my work also complements such perspective in three directions, by arguing that compliance with secular-liberal norms on the part of pious French Muslims is layered with *class*, *political*, and *ethical* sensibilities.

To begin with, some previous engagements with the politeness of marginalized group members tend to consider these practices a reflection of their vulnerable social status – a vulnerability understood in terms of both minority/majority dynamics and social class background (Sayad 2004; Fernando 2014). While it is indeed crucial to map the enactment of politeness onto precise power relations (Islam being highly stigmatized in France and Europe), the material I collected suggests that an emphasis on good manners, etiquette, and discretion can also be sited in the position of socially privileged individuals. As we shall see, the Muslim leaders I talked to mostly belong to the middle classes and they ground their exhortation to impeccable manners and clothing in the

socioeconomic resources at their disposal – hence the need to uncouple practices of politeness from lower social status.

Secondly, the assumption according to which privatized religiosity and self-restraint represent some form of concession to secular governmentality needs to be complicated. Pulling a little harder at the thread of discretion and its political implications, one begins to notice that the self-contained, unobtrusive forms of religiosity embraced by some French Muslim leaders can also encompass, at times, a powerful critique against restrictive secularism and postcolonial hierarchies. Rather than an expression of compromise and adjustment, the discreet Islam practiced by my interlocutors introduces ambiguity in the status quo, presenting alternative embodied images of their religion in public conversations and cultivating collective aspirations of justice and respect.

Finally, there is an epistemic risk in understanding discreet Islam as a sort of false consciousness, in which Muslims are trapped in preserving the secular republican order (a risk avoided by most authors quoted above). Doing so overlooks the ethical potential of discreet Islam and, correlatively, the "emic reflexivity" of worshippers, that is, their capability to meaningfully account for their actions (Esmili 2024: 64). Indeed, for the Muslim leaders I have worked with, practices of discretion and self-restraint were primarily lived, experienced, and reflected upon as pious endeavors directed at salvation and submission to God. Their ultimate purpose remains to abide by divine prescriptions and construe themselves as authentic Islamic subjects, with their embrace of discreet Islam serving as a channel for nurturing and expressing their faith.

RESPECTABILITY POLITICS: A TRANSATLANTIC CONVERSATION ON CLASS AND ETHICS IN MINORITY POLITICS

To apprehend discreet Islam's complexity, I suggest taking a step aside and engaging in a transatlantic conversation regarding politeness and citizenship, morals and politics. The concept of respectability politics, borrowed from Black studies, unlocks many of the core analytical quandaries in European Muslim studies. Respectability politics was first elaborated upon by the US historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham to characterize the work of the Women's Convention of the Black Baptist Church at the turn of the twentieth century. In her book, Higginbotham observes the ways in which pious Black women sought to promote racial pride through behavioral policing of their own people. The emphasis they put

on hard work, temperance, piety, and cleanliness was to reflect "blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals" (Higginbotham 1993: 187). In doing so, they were boldly challenging their socially imposed inferiority and talking back to dominant representations of Black communities as a national liability. In denouncing some Blacks' improprieties, however, Baptist women also unintentionally mimicked racist stereotypes of poor Black and working-class individuals who did not conform to the values of white America.

Privileged members of marginalized groups complying with dominant social norms to advance their group's condition constitute the essence of respectability politics (Dazey 2021a). The concept offers a key analytical tool for exploring how moral conduct and proper behavior were put in the service of a project of community uplift, and how the making of respectability entails a processual effort of (self and collective) behavioral discipline. What is more, respectability politics highlights the fact that power relations infuse all social strata, including marginalized groups. Rather than two easily identifiable antagonistic groups (Black people vs. white people, migrants vs. natives, Muslims vs. non-Muslims), the study of respectability politics draws attention to class dynamics cutting across group boundaries and fostering unexpected forms of collaboration between dominant and subordinate groups. The concept is also useful for adding complexity to our understanding of domination and resistance: By embracing norms of moral rightfulness and behavioral decency, practitioners of respectability politics challenge the particular (devalued) position they occupy in the social hierarchy but do not undermine this hierarchy.

As a framework, respectability politics makes sense of the discreet Islam embraced by my interlocutors – shedding much-needed light on its multifaceted dimensions: its representational impulse, its colonial legacies, its incorporation through morals and manners, its grounding in middle-class attributes, its political ambivalence, and its ethical lineages within the Islamic revivalist tradition.[5] We shall briefly consider these dimensions, before outlining the sources and methodology of this study.

[5] While the concept of internal reform (*iṣlāḥ*) has a long history in the Islamic tradition, grounded both in Qur'anic occurrences and Prophetic sayings, current Islamic revivalist movements emerged in the mid nineteenth century as an attempt to rejuvenate Islamic thought in reaction to Western onslaughts on the Muslim world and at a time of the formation of nation-states (Merad et al. 2012). Main thinkers include Muhamad Abduh, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, and Muhamad Rashid Rida: They exhorted worshippers who had not attended traditional Islamic institutions to directly engage with the scriptures and reform Muslim societies through a public engagement in the name of Islam.

Representational Concerns

Respectability politics of French Muslim leaders first translates into a perpetual preoccupation with the majority society's perceptions of the Muslim community. They are constantly aware of their vulnerable position under the secular gaze, something they share with the Black Baptist women who were worried about white America's judgment (Higginbotham 1993). To draw on the vocabulary used by Muslim leaders, their ambition is to offer a "proper" image of Islam, against widespread negative representations, and give their community a good name. They speak at length of ideas of respect and dignity (*dignité* in French, *karāma* in Arabic), and most of them acknowledge bearing a representational burden that makes them in charge of dispelling prejudices against their religion.

This "imperative to represent" (Quashie 2012: 4) has been noted in other studies on Muslims in Europe. Özyürek (2015) has shown how much German converts shape their faith and practice in reaction to hostility from mainstream society. Jouili (2015: 188) has documented how pious women in France and Germany are highly self-conscious regarding their exposedness within mainstream society and "relentlessly thought about questions of representation." Rogozen-Soltar (2017) and van Es (2019) have also analyzed the representational concerns and practices of Spanish and Dutch Muslims, respectively, with the view to challenge popular perceptions of their religion. In similar ways, the Muslim leaders that I have worked with in France are very much aware of patterns of exclusion to which they themselves and their coreligionists are subjected to. Their second-class status pushes them to adopt conformist attitudes as they need to navigate conflict-ridden secular spaces. They take into consideration designing transparent mosques that architecturally epitomize their trustworthiness. They are careful to be discreet under the gaze of passersby. They make sure not to get angry when confronted with animosity. The ubiquitous surveillance of their behavior pushes them into positions of constant self-monitoring, with fears of giving Islam a bad name. Overall, much about their daily choices and behaviors has to do with establishing themselves as respectable members of society – acceptable to white, non-Muslim sensibilities.

Colonial Legacies

These efforts at discretion and "not making waves" vary by context. Scripts of respectability are historically coded in terms of racial, religious,

and class privilege, and being respectable in Victorian England would differ from being respectable in the early twentieth-century United States and twenty-first-century France (Thompson 1988; Higginbotham 1993). In the latter case, projects of respectability are shaped by (post)colonial legacies. Notions of "civil" and "civilized" – and the interlocking stigmatization of "barbarity" and "savagism" – have historically been used to exclude some groups from public discussions (Thiranagama et al. 2018). This is certainly true of French colonization in North Africa, where conceptions of civility were caught up in projects of secularization and "modernization" (Amer Meziane 2021).

During the colonial period, Islam came to be associated with fanaticism, idleness, and propensity to crime (Le Cour Grandmaison 2019). All three representations continue to pervade contemporary discussions on religion, and French Muslim leaders must consequently position themselves against them. Colonial scholars and administrators alike have conceived Islam as a rigid and totalizing system, making Muslimness appear immutable and leaving civility racially marked as white (Saada 2012). As Naomi Davidson (2012: 3) observed, the colonial period witnessed the "saturation of 'Muslims' with Muslimness" – a process that continues in twenty-first-century France, where Islam is thought to saturate the behavior of believers and where Muslims are collectively labeled as uncivil (Becker 2022).

Conversely, civil religion came to be identified with rationality, liberation from superstition, privatization of faith, and discretion in public spaces, with correlated injunctions made to colonial subjects to civilize themselves through reform (Amer Meziane 2015). These injunctions were part of broader authoritarian efforts to surveil and regulate Islam, which involved promoting "good Muslims" to positions of responsibility in colonized Algeria (Saaïdia 2015). Today, these disciplinary endeavors take the form of different attempts to make Muslims willfully submit to the republic – such as the state-sponsored charter "of republican values" addressed to French Muslim leaders in 2020 – and to render Islam invisible – through the stigmatization of minarets, the legal banning of face veils in public spaces and the prohibition of burkinis on beaches.[6] Claims of religious discretion, polite behavior, and adherence to "liberal" values are therefore not neutral; rather, they underline the "republican civility" mentioned by the French president Emmanuel Macron in his Les Mureaux speech on "Islamist separatism" (Bounaga 2023). As such, idioms of respectability

[6] Lucy Williamson, "France Islam: Muslims under Pressure to Sign French Values Charter," *BBC News*, December 1, 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55132098.

and civility in contemporary France seem intimately tied to histories of colonial domination and the maintenance of the social order, disguising inequalities as products of moral worth. However, these idioms cannot be reduced to their conservative, or even reactionary, dimensions. Scripts of civility and respectability have other faces as well, since they can provide active forms of sociability alongside commitments to the common good (Thiranagama et al. 2018). It is precisely the complexity and intricate nature of these scripts that this book pays attention to.

Morals and Manners

As showed by Higginbotham (1993), morals and manners are a privileged channel for fashioning respectable subjectivities. Rather than grand narratives of political subversions, the deployment of respectability politics draws attention to smaller gestures and affects. In particular, my interlocutors render good manners the basis of their ethical and political commitments, permeating their sense of self and their project of community uplift. In their eyes, Muslim worshippers have a duty to radiate Islamic virtues: Everyday good behavior is a way to bring inner virtues to the fore and to impress others – non-Muslims and Muslims alike – through the excellence of their character.

For the French Muslim leaders I interviewed, good manners operate at three different levels: civility, bodily presentation, and emotional self-regulation. They understand civility from another tradition than the colonial one: the Islamic tradition of *ādāb*, in its narrow sense of manners, politeness, and etiquette in face-to-face interactions. As we shall see, civility requires Muslims to make reassuring eye contact with strangers, be courteous to their neighbors, smile in the face of hostile looks, and speak with a temperate tone of voice. It also implies discretion when praying, courtesy in seasonal greetings, and all sorts of polite communication. While civility is enacted in social interactions, between two individuals or more, bodily presentation concerns the self. It first consists of dressing appropriately, which, for the Muslim leaders I interacted with, means in accordance with both Islamic norms of modesty and "French" sartorial conventions (rather than "Arab" ways of dressing). Corporeal quality also touches upon personal hygiene and cleanliness, moderation in food consumption, and regular physical exercise. These practices delineate a model personality that falls in line with Islamic revivalist conceptions of temperance and excellence (Kamali 2015). Lastly, for French Muslim leaders, good manners need to be enacted as specific emotional states. On one hand, this implies

cultivating dispositions of openness, forbearance, and gentleness – such affectivities being connected with representational concerns regarding how Islam is perceived. On the other hand, it supposes a particular labor of emotional restraint, in terms of containing anger in the face of stigma and practicing patience against adversity. All these incorporated manners point to the iterative character of respectability politics: To those in marginalized groups, respectability is achieved through the constant reiteration of proper behavior and moral embodiments.

What distinguishes the good manners of the Muslim leaders I interviewed from the politeness of Algerian migrants described by Sayad (2004), however, is their insertion into a collective endeavor. For French Muslim leaders, good manners are not only a matter of individual conduct; they are part of a broader project of community uplift – hence the relevance of a respectability politics perspective, which emphasizes the collective implications of appropriateness. In similar ways to the pious Black women studied by Higginbotham (1993: 187), French Muslim leaders' concerns with morals and manners serve their aspirations for group advancement. The discipline they impose on their own people, by enforcing norms of civility, bodily presentation, and emotional regulation, is meant to achieve inclusion and respect.

Middle-Class Privileges

Behavioral policing is built on a binary logic of inclusion and exclusion that defines personal worthiness. The pious Muslim leaders I worked with do not depart from this "grammar of evaluation" (Lamont 2000: 4) and draw moral boundaries that partly resemble that of early twentieth-century Black women studied by Higginbotham. Their logic of classification implies a set of paired oppositions – quiet/boisterous, hardworking/idle, distinguished/vulgar – that underpins their evaluation of coreligionists. According to this logic, some members of the Muslim community are worthy of respect while others partly deserve the inferiorization to which they are subjected.

The contours of European Muslims' in-group boundary work have been traced ethnographically, with scholars of the Islamic revival stressing its generational impetus.[7] Second- and third-generation Muslims are

[7] Boundary work can be defined as the "kinds of typification systems, or inferences concerning similarities and differences, groups mobilize to define who they are" (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 171).

quick to distinguish their understanding of Islam from that of their parents (Killian 2007; Liberatore 2017). They contrast their learned Islam, which is "text-based, discursive, consciously reflected upon – and therefore 'understood'" (Jouili 2015: 28), with the unreflective, "traditional" practices of their parents. Such logic of distinction is a way for them to stress their national belonging, grounded in "modernist" interpretations of Islam, even though it excludes those who do not belong, whether that be their parents or other "simplistic" Muslims (Fernando 2014: 57). Besides generational lines of division, Muslim worshippers are also keen to carry out intra-community boundary work along racial lines. This is particularly salient in the case of white converts. German converts seek to dissociate themselves from Turkish and Arab coreligionists in their endeavor to build a "purified Islam," cleansed from the traditions of immigrant Muslims and grounded in Enlightenment ideals of rationality and tolerance (Özyürek 2015). And converts in Granada claim to practice a culture-free Islam, at a distance from the traditions of Moroccan Muslims (Rogozen-Soltar 2017). Scholarship on these topics has contributed to debunking the myth of a homogeneous Muslim community, unearthing Muslims' involvement in nurturing intra-group boundaries while showing the entanglement of such boundaries with larger power structures.

Investigating the respectability politics of French Muslim leaders takes this a step further by underscoring another line of intra-community divisions: social class. Indeed, the literature on the Islamic revival in Europe and the lived experience of Muslims in general is characterized by a class-blind approach.[8] Yet the dissociation mechanisms at the core of French Muslims' respectability politics point to how much social class shapes their grammar of evaluation. The lines they draw between honorable, reputable members of the community and deviant, disreputable ones intimately overlap with class distinctions.

To begin with, the Muslim leaders with whom I spoke enjoy a variety of privileges compared to most of their first-generation coreligionists: They arrived in France for their studies rather than as migrant workers, and most of them originated from a privileged social background and had been exposed to French culture in their home country. Once in France, they

[8] Beaman (2017), Parvez (2017), Beaugé (2022), and Souanef (in press) would be the exceptions. This class-blind approach overlaps with miserabilist assumptions, since the majority of research done on Islam in Europe focuses on lower-class worshippers without questioning this class characteristic.

achieved graduate education, giving them access to high-status professions, for example as teachers, doctors, and engineers, and providing them with the financial resources necessary for a comfortable lifestyle, made of quiet residences, costly holidays, and status-enhancing leisure activities. These resources have much to do with their uplift ideology and respectability politics. For them, being a good Muslim – and thus challenging dominant stereotypes – requires getting a good education, working hard, being professionally accomplished, and paying taxes – at a distance from worshippers failing their education or living on welfare checks. The discreet Islam they promote also supposes to be conversant in French, to differentiate from those migrant workers who speak poorly and with strong foreign accents. It also implies dressing suitably on formal occasions (preferably a tie and suit for men and elegant dresses for women) and practicing discreetly ("It is bad that people see us pray," said one interviewee; see Chapter 5), in contrast to coreligionists whom they consider excessively loud in their piety. The moral boundaries they draw between respectable and unrespectable Muslims thus directly intersect with class boundaries, as the attributes underpinning discreet Islam presuppose the possession of specific cultural, economic, and social capital that is unequally distributed among (Muslim) populations. Even their religious doctrine is colored by class-based judgments, as they despise the "ignorant" religiosity of migrant workers while condemning the "simplistic" understanding of Salafi and Tablighi followers. As such, respectability can be partly read as a class-based project designed to facilitate the integration of elite sections of Muslim populations into French social fabric, at the expense of lower-class segments.

A Path of Conformation and Resistance

From the preceding sections, we can grasp the profound ambivalence of respectability politics, bearing both oppressive and emancipatory outcomes for minority citizens. In contrast with most previous engagements with the concept, which tend to characterize respectability politics as capitulation (Cohen 2010; Harris 2012), this type of politics is best understood as located at the crossroads of forms of acquiescence, adaptation, and resistance to dominant imaginaries.[9]

[9] Higginbotham says nothing less in her examination of Black Baptist women. She emphatically warns against any simplistic conception of respectability politics, stating that "such a politics did not reduce to an accommodationist stance toward racism, or a compensatory ideology in the face of powerlessness" (Higginbotham 1993: 187).

In many respects, my interlocutors appropriate the secular-liberal scripts that condition Muslims' precarious belonging in the French polity. They redeploy the bad Muslims/good Muslims trope that underlies the state's agenda and unwittingly reproduce popular preconceptions by distinguishing "deserving" Muslims from "insufficiently integrated" or "poorly educated" ones. They also endorse individual explanations of marginalization and downplay structural ones, rendering lower-class Muslims responsible for their own social incorporation. They attenuate visible markers of difference and encourage forms of white passing, criticizing what they see as the aggressive visibility of some worshippers. And through their elite ideology of social uplift, they promote mainstream values of success based on socioeconomic performance and personal responsibility. All in all, their respectability politics facilitates the inclusion of a privileged few on the condition that they appropriate dominant values of discretion and deservingness. They thereby tend to reinforce the conditional belonging of French Muslims, further excluding nonconformist worshippers. While studying these conservative outcomes is a worthy task – and one that this book undertakes – appropriation of dominant scripts cannot be collapsed into forms of political capitulation. These are distinct maneuvers.

Respectability politics has something to offer Muslim leaders willing to oppose anti-Muslim stereotypes of violence and backwardness. Their daily actions manifest, in practice, the commensurability of Frenchness and Muslimness against widespread views of irreconcilability. While not explicitly disruptive, since they are premised on hegemonic norms of conduct, these practices can transform dominant imaginaries through alternate images of their community. More precisely, Muslim leaders' respectability politics allows their bodies to respond directly to stereotypes through unobtrusive methods, by radiating virtue and conformity. In the process, they nurture feelings of decency and deservingness within their faith community and encourage expectations for fair treatment – dimensions that are politically and subjectively powerful given the high climate of Islamophobia in France. In the long run, their ambition is less the recognition of a distinct Islamic identity by the state and the majority society than social indifference and the right to be forgotten (Fernando 2014: 27). Put differently, they "simply" aspire to pass unnoticed while being part of the picture – in summary, to taste the "privilege of banality: the supreme pleasure of occupying the place of the unmarked" (Oliphant 2021: 208). All in all, respectability politics appears politically ambivalent, holding both subversive and

conservative implications: It consists of offering an oppositional space to Islamophobic attitudes while simultaneously reinforcing the values of the secular-republican majority.

Ethical Practice

Understanding respectability politics only in terms of its conservative and progressive potentialities is problematic. Doing so implicitly reduces Muslim leaders' efforts toward respectability down to their representational concerns (that is, giving Islam a good name). But representational concerns under the secular gaze are only one part of the story. If by adopting an exemplary conduct, Muslims attempt to deflect stigma and achieve respect, they certainly also engage in a more intimate endeavor, tied with perfectionist aspirations of self-realization. It is not only with regard to the dominant society's gaze that members of marginalized communities engage with respectability politics; these practices also relate to an introspective project of self-definition and moral, intellectual, and physical elevation.[10]

For Muslim leaders, this project of self-definition is fully premised on pious considerations. Cultivating politeness, good manners, and civility is primarily thought of, and reflected upon, as a way to obey God's commands and glorify Him. Similarly, strong work ethics, patience against adversity, and openness to cultural difference are part of meticulous efforts to live Islam authentically. Mohamed – a Franco-Tunisian in his mid sixties who has occupied top leadership positions in French and European Islamic organizations – says nothing else when he defines Islamic spirituality in terms of responsible behavior:

> Do you know what spirituality brings? It's very simple. When you visit someone, you don't take somebody's place when parking your car and you don't block the road by double parking. When you knock on someone's door, you knock three times and you leave if you don't get an answer. You don't leave the light on when you leave the room. You don't spit anywhere. You don't throw your cigarette butt in the street. In reality, spirituality is about having responsible behavior.[11]

[10] The ethical, introspective underpinnings of respectability politics were already present in Higginbotham's work, though they have fallen into neglect since. Higginbotham (1993: 186) demonstrates how the Baptist church provided Black women with a safe space to construct themselves as worthy subjects, refiguring themselves simultaneously as Americans, Blacks, and women.

[11] Interview with Mohamed A., September 2016, La Courneuve.

The exhortation to behave responsibly drums a familiar beat, with Muslim leaders' quest of respectability directly flowing from Islamic morals and manners. For Mohamed, any small gesture of courtesy in everyday interactions spurs from cultivated Islamic dispositions. The notion of *akhlāq* – implicit in his testimony and omnipresent in the Islamic circles I observed – encompasses the tight relationship between ethics and conduct, morality and behavior that underpins their sense of self. For many Muslim leaders, *akhlāq* constitutes a favored modality of ethical self-fashioning that encloses efficient ways to manage stigma but is not reducible to representational considerations.

Put differently, French Muslim leaders do more than simply manage dominant expectations (Ortner 1995: 177), and many of their daily choices and behaviors are made independently of the ambition of opposing hegemonic norms. While negotiating moments of subjection and power is an essential dimension of their daily existence (a dimension that respectability politics seeks to unpack in all its complexities), their inner life is not determined by a public language of inferiority (Quashie 2012). A big part of their agency is turned elsewhere, this elsewhere being often toward God and the cultivation of an Islamic habitus (despite the fact that even the most pious life paths are marked by inconsistencies; Schielke 2009). It is this triad of "self-society-God" (Becker 2021: 18) that I have encountered among the leaders of the Union des organisations islamiques de France (which was renamed Musulmans de France in 2017).

AN EMBLEMATIC TRAJECTORY OF RESPECTABILITY POLITICS: THE UNION OF ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS OF FRANCE (UOIF)

The analyses presented in this book are based on immersive work and interviews conducted with sixty-six Muslim activists. These activists have in common involvement in local Muslim associations scattered around France, from Amiens to Bordeaux and Marseille to Valenciennes. Many were born in Muslim-majority countries – Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Lebanon, or Niger – and about a third were born in France. They were at different stages of their lives when I met them, with some in their twenties (these were usually in charge of Muslim student or youth associations), others in their late sixties, and still others in their midlife. In addition to their Islamic activism, they are teachers, students, dentists, architects, and engineers but also parents, spouses, and siblings.

The majority are men, though eleven of them are women. As importantly, what unites them is a connection to what is arguably the biggest Islamic umbrella organization in France. With about 40 affiliated Muslim centers and 150 sympathizer mosques throughout the country, the Union des organisations islamiques de France (the Union of Islamic Organizations of France, hereafter the UOIF) is considered by Muslim worshippers and external observers alike as a central player in the French Islamic landscape. Despite its prominence, though, no comprehensive study of this organization exists and we know surprisingly little about its history, functioning, and daily activities.[12] Yet Muslim activists of the UOIF offer an important case study for those interested in the respectability politics of minority citizens. Forty-two of my interlocutors were members of the UOIF; sixteen were members of the youth associations affiliated with the UOIF, whether Jeunes musulmans de France (JMF, Young Muslims of France) or Étudiants musulmans de France (EMF, Muslim Students of France); and eight were activists who belonged to competing organizations (such as Collectif des musulmans de France, that is, the Collective of France's Muslims) but were close enough to UOIF activists to join in with occasional collective action.

Founded in 1983 by students and activists, some of whom had links with the Muslim Brotherhood, the UOIF aspires to revive Islamic orthodoxy[13] within Muslim migrant communities in France and promote what they call a "middle-way Islam" deliberately adapted to Muslim-minority societies. In the name of *wasaṭiyya* (the "middle-way" in Islamic discursive tradition), these pious worshippers deploy unparalleled institution-building skills. In less than forty years, they were able to erect dozens of mosques across France and currently run countless other Muslim centers – spaces where I sat and lingered for this research. These mosques

[12] Apart from a master's thesis (Darif 2004) and a handful of articles and book chapters (Geisser 2006; Peter 2006a; Maréchal 2008), we know little about UOIF members. Other studies are predominantly policy-oriented and aim to measure the organization's commitment to democratic values. Using the idiom of public expertise, these works often adopt a comparative perspective with Muslim Brotherhood-related movements in Europe and retain a macro-lens preventing the examination of UOIF's everyday politics (Rubin 2010; Ternisien 2011; Amghar 2013; Pargeter 2013).

[13] In line with Fadil (2011: 93): "'Orthodoxy' refers here less to rigid or conservative viewpoints, and more to a set of epistemological procedures, discourses and practices (*usul-al-fiqh*) in the development of Islamic knowledge that is considered authoritative, and thus is given a prescriptive legitimacy. These procedures consist among others of a particular understanding of the foundational texts, that is the *Qur'an* (as the word of God) and the *Sunna* (as second mandatory source), the abidance to the consensus (*ijma'*) for Sunni Islam and the reasoning by analogy (*qiyyas*)."

stand as the "[Muslim] group's invitation to itself" (Esmili 2024: 55), providing a moral and physical space for the reinvestment of the Islamic tradition among postcolonial immigrant populations. But this thrust for community organizing expands beyond the realm of religious prayers and rituals. In addition to mosques and prayerhouses, UOIF leaders disseminate their call through various sectorial institutions. One of the first they created was the student organization EMF, which has burgeoned across French universities since the mid 1980s, regularly winning seats in university councils. But not all Muslim youths attend university, and UOIF leaders also founded JMF in 1993 to court young believers from immigrant neighborhoods and put them back on the path of piety. As well as students and young people, UOIF leaders also cater to female worshippers. In 1993, they founded the Ligue française de la femme musulmane, that is, the French League of the Muslim Woman, which encourages women to participate in French society while protecting their religious freedom (notably the right to wear the veil). And they played a pioneering role in the emergence of the first Islamic nongovernmental organization (NGO) in France through the foundation of the Comité de bienfaisance et de secours aux Palestiniens (CBSP, Committee for Charity and Support for the Palestinians) in 1990 and the establishment of the Secours islamique, the French branch of Islamic Relief, in 1991.[14] In addition to the above institutions – testifying to the unparalleled energy of UOIF leaders in bringing shape and order to a relatively recent and deprived community – the UOIF deployed its bureaucratic craftsmanship in two vital arenas of the French Islamic landscape: education and political representation.

In line with their project of community uplift, UOIF leaders are particularly active in the field of Islamic education. Their ambition is to nurture a respectable class of educated Muslims who would embody Islamic values of excellence, good behavior, and civility. To do so, they run weekly Arabic and Qur'anic classes for children in the dozens of affiliated mosques of the organization. Every weekend in France, thousands of children and teenagers sit in a classroom similar to the one described at the opening of the chapter learning Arabic, memorizing the Qur'an, and discussing the core tenets of the Muslim faith. To cater for adult instruction, UOIF leaders also created the first institute of Islamic higher education, the Institut européen des sciences humaines (IESH, the European Institute of Human Sciences). The institute has two branches – one in a rural area in Burgundy, Château-Chinon, conceived

[14] For more details on these associations, see Hadjab (2005) and Faure (2023).

as a devotional retreat from the frenzies of modern life, and one in Saint-Denis, in the northern suburbs of Paris, upholding the urban and spiritual needs of other worshippers. The institute offers full-time programs of study for aspiring imams but also nonprofessional courses geared to French-speaking students willing to learn about their religion. Lastly, UOIF activists are the driving force behind the project of establishing Muslim private schools in France. They opened the first Muslim high school in Lille in the early 2000s and have further expanded their activities by founding private establishments in Marseille, Lyon, and other cities and organizing this emerging sector through the Fédération nationale de l'enseignement privé musulman (FNEM, the National Federation for Private Muslim Education).[15]

Quite naturally, given their concern for institutions and republican goodwill, UOIF leaders became vehemently involved in state-sponsored initiatives to create a Muslim representative council. Since the late 1980s, French governments have endeavored to appoint Muslim interlocutors to oversee the management of Muslim affairs. The idea was to minimize foreign influence on domestic populations and regain control of religious affairs on French soil (Laurence 2012). This reorientation coincided with a new policy consensus regarding the importance of better integrating the Muslim youth into the French body polity and thereby preventing the spread of extremist Islam (Peter 2006a: 708). These councils came in different guises, from the Conseil de réflexion sur l'islam en France (CORIF, Council for Reflection on Islam in France) set up by Interior Minister Joxe in 1989 to the Istichara/Consultation Council put in place by Interior Minister Chevènement in 1999 and the Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM, French Council of the Muslim Faith) implemented by Interior Minister Sarkozy in 2003. The last episode of state interventionism in Muslim affairs – in a regime that, let us not forget, professes separation between state and religions – happened in 2022, when President Macron announced the dissolution of the long-standing CFCM in favor of a new institution, the Forum de l'islam de France (FORIF, Forum of French Islam). Leaders of the UOIF participated in this epic history at every step of the way. They used the institutional stage to display their adherence to the civil Islam expected of Muslim representatives – politically compliant, culturally Frenchified, socially acceptable. And their middle-class set of expertise, administrative skills, and professionalism bolstered their credibility in the eyes of

[15] On this educational activism, see Girin (2021).

governmental authorities,[16] even though it also cost them some legitimacy in the eyes of Muslim constituents. Overall, much has been written about these councils (Cesari 2004; Zeghal 2005) and UOIF participation in them (Geisser 2006; Laurence 2012). My argument builds on these works to chart the UOIF's (failed) efforts at normalization but also looks beyond this well-known history of state–Islam relations. Rather than the high-profile interactions between top leaders of the UOIF and governmental officials, I focus on more mundane, routine enactments of respectability politics within grassroot Muslim communities, locating the making of discreet Islam in classrooms, mosques, and conference venues, rather than in the corridors of the Interior Ministry.

A Leading Actor in the Islamic Revival Movement

So why is the trajectory of the UOIF leaders emblematic of respectability politics? Owing to the singular identity of the organization to which they belong, their positioning and trajectory are particularly insightful for understanding minority citizens' efforts of normalization. Because the UOIF is historically tied to the Islamist movement of the Muslim Brotherhood, its leaders are regularly found guilty – in the eyes of public authorities and the media – of transnational allegiance and subversive ideology. They are constantly chastised in public conversations as deceitful Islamists, suspected of orchestrating an insidious project of Islamization of French society and disseminating an exclusivist ideology.[17] They are also accused of using *taqiyya* (deceptiveness) regarding their antisemitic, homophobic, and misogynistic views, with the overarching goal to influence Islam-related policies of European states. Lastly, they are charged with promoting a "communitarianist" agenda hindering the republican project of unity and universalism – an anathema that bears high reputational costs in the French public sphere and that stigmatizes postcolonial migrants and Muslims as anti-republican separatists (Hajjat and Mohammed 2016). At the time of finishing this book, in the spring

[16] As stated in the organization's newsletter in 2006: "Everyone who has worked with us consider the UOIF as a credible, reliable, free and independent actor." Lhaj Thami Breze, "L'UOIF : réalisations et orientations," inaugural address delivered at the 2006 Annual Gathering of French Muslims quoted in *La Lettre de l'UOIF*, July–September 2006, vol. 1: 1–20 (p. 3).

[17] This argument is developed in a well-publicized book on the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe (Florence Bergeaud-Blackler. 2023. *Le frérisme et ses réseaux: l'enquête*. Paris: Odile Jacob). For a critique, see Dazey (2024).

of 2024, the banning of the UOIF (rebranded Musulmans de France since 2017) is looming large in public discussions.

It is precisely this ill-reputed background that nurtured my interest in understanding how Muslim leaders were coping with external pressures for civil Islam. Muslim leaders of the UOIF embody a paradigmatic case regarding the steps to take to be recognized as "good Muslims" in a secular-liberal society. Their trajectory reveals in a clear-cut manner the multifaceted pressures exerted upon Muslim leaders in Europe and, in reaction, these leaders' endeavors in navigating the competing sets of demands that are placed upon them.

The distant affiliation of the UOIF with the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) not only impacts the public image of the organization; it translates into intellectual lineages and organizational habits that are the object of much scrutiny. In terms of intellectual lineages, leaders of the UOIF are quick to refer to traditional references of the Brotherhood's movement and its middle-way approach (*wasaṭiyya*) (Maréchal 2008), even though they do so with caution and critical reflexivity. Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Brotherhood, represents a canonical yet partially challenged figure for most of my interlocutors, while Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb, Faysal Mawlawi, and Yusuf Qaradawi were mentioned extensively but with words of caution, with French Muslim leaders seeking to interpret their works in light of the French contemporary context and to dissociate themselves from these thinkers' controversial aura (Van Praet 2019). In terms of organizational practices, UOIF members engage in several activities and rituals that display a resemblance to the Muslim Brotherhood's functioning in Muslim-majority countries. To become a member of the organization, individuals progress in a multitiered membership system: After being identified as "sympathizers" of the UOIF, they are required to take an oath of allegiance (*bayʿa*) to become members. Once in, they are subjected to intense intellectual and religious training (*tarbiyya*) that entails regular attendance of study circles (*ḥalaqāt*) and participation in an activist "family" (*usra*). Their progression within the organization is conditioned upon their religious observance, morality, and personal involvement in UOIF activities. Based on these criteria, they can be promoted from "ordinary members" to "active members," broadly reiterating some organizational features of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Beyond this intellectual and organizational pedigree, and perhaps more importantly for my argument, UOIF leaders' distant embedding within the Muslim Brotherhood movement translates into a strong

emphasis on social exemplarity and ethical conduct. As shown by Marie Vannetzel (2021) in relation to the Egyptian Brotherhood (in a different context and organization), *ikhwānī* activists are prone to acting as "virtuous neighbors," with their irreproachable conduct aimed at nurturing a moral transformation of society. Their ambition is to serve as exemplary models for other Muslims and, to do so, follow the doctrinal principle of *al-amr bi al-maʿrūf wa al-nahī ʿan al-munkar*, the obligation to "enjoin the good and forbid what is wrong." In some respects, this insistence on behavioral excellence resonates with UOIF activism in France. For members of the organization, *muʿāmalāt* (the rules governing interactions between society members) are as important as *ʿibādāt* (the rules governing acts of devotion in Islam that Dalil discussed in class). Besides, Muslim worshippers are expected to be "helpful," "productive" members of society, considering "usefulness" as an act of worship and following the Prophetic saying that "The most beloved people to Allah are those who are most beneficial to people" (Van Praet 2019: 299–302). Muslims are thus to be exemplary in their social conduct at different levels: in relation to themselves, their community, and the broader society. This gradual reform of society is tied to a particular project of the self that pervades all aspects of life – from dress code to bodily restraint and from virtuous display in everyday relations to self-conscious altruism in one's immediate environment.

The ethos of Muslim Brotherhood-inspired movements – and other Islamic revivalist movements for that matter – is thus to position themselves as moral references and community leaders. Observing them, rather than ordinary worshippers with no community commitments, is particularly insightful for studying intra-community forms of policing. Because of their involvement in religious associations, Muslim leaders in general and UOIF leaders in particular are bearers of normative discourses regarding what constitutes "good Islam" and how "good Muslims" should behave. This social positioning prompts them to articulate prescriptive views about what sort of religious understanding is correct or not, what conduct is desirable or not, what type of worshipper is worthy or not – that is, the kind of evaluative judgments at the heart of respectability politics. Beyond judgments and moral evaluations, community leaders also possess specific resources to discipline the minds and bodies of their coreligionists. Through their extra-community relations (access to the media, routine interactions with public officials) and their intra-community authority (enacted in Friday sermons, class lessons, and discretionary power in allocating charity donations), they

are well placed to enforce normative versions of what it means to be a (discreet) Muslim. It is this quest for discreet Islam embraced by many Muslim citizens across Europe that this book unpacks through the use of ethnographic investigation, a method that had not been previously used in the case of the UOIF, or any Islamic representative organization in France for that matter.

The Researcher as a Witness to Civic Virtuousness

My fieldwork with Muslim leaders of the UOIF lasted from 2014 to 2018. During this time, I conducted interviews, gathered observations, and carried out archival work. My first observations led me to participate in grassroot activities, going to local mosques, and participating in public events. Later on, as trust grew, I conducted interviews with more than sixty activists, inquiring about their family background, educational credentials, professional careers, and experiences of activism. These interviews lasted from an hour to half a day and took place at the interviewees' homes and offices as well as in cafés and Islamic centers, offering further insights into their daily lives. Alongside interviews, I continued to attend the activities organized by their associations, such as spiritual evenings for adults, Qur'anic classes for children, Friday prayers in mosques, weekend conferences, and annual gatherings in Paris and the provinces. My fieldwork sometimes led me outside of France to attend Muslim public gatherings in Geneva, London, and Brussels or conduct interviews with key individuals in Tunis and Beirut. But I spent most of my time carrying out observations in three local sections affiliated with the UOIF in Bordeaux, La Courneuve, and Lille.[18] These observations made me aware of the pervasiveness of respectability concerns in these activists' lives. They constantly bring up the subject of the unfavorable media coverage of their activities. They spontaneously mention their ambition to expose Muslims' uncivil image as false. And they regularly discuss the best responses to overcome anti-Muslim prejudices in French society.

Since respectability politics is not only about making legitimacy claims but also about making these claims heard and accepted, I also spent time inquiring among Muslim constituents and extra-community

[18] I chose these locations for heuristic reasons: Bordeaux and Lille are two historical strongholds of the UOIF with a vivid community of members and a large number of affiliated mosques; La Courneuve is where the UOIF headquarters is located and where several affiliated associations are active.

audiences. Regarding the former, I conducted an additional dozen interviews with former UOIF leaders and other Muslim political actors, as well as countless informal conversations with non-activist Muslims who were attending UOIF activities: students, conference attendees, mosque worshippers, and so on. As far as extra-community audiences were concerned, I draw on state documentation, including intelligence briefings, political memos, and confidential data on French Muslim leaders.[19] Governmental documents were complemented by various media sources, providing insights into the ways in which Muslim leaders were perceived more broadly.[20]

As a non-Muslim, white French woman, I had first expected it to be difficult to gain access to Muslim leaders because of the tense political climate surrounding Islam. But instead of the substantial barriers I anticipated, most leaders cordially welcomed me into their classrooms and their mosques. Taking my cue from Howard Becker (1998) about noticing "what doesn't fit" in terms of personal expectations, I realized that the unforeseen ease of the fieldwork had much to do with these leaders' vulnerable public status and the power relations inevitably at play in ethnographic encounters. Many of them were tired of the distorted, externalist coverage of their activities by some journalists and scholars who wrote about them only "from a distance" and instead welcomed the occasion of long-term observations conducted by a (non-Muslim, white privileged, upper middle-class) researcher. One of them presented me to another leader in the following terms: "She is a PhD student who is not hostile to us."[21] Another thanked me at the end of an interview: "You're the first one to conduct a research project on us without any preconceived idea. We don't have to tell you everything because you just experience

[19] Through requests for special access to the French National Archives, I was granted authorization to consult classified materials produced by different services of the Interior Ministry. Covering a period between 1995 and 2005, these archives were useful for shedding a different (security-driven) light on UOIF members' narratives as well as for understanding the diverse opinions on the UOIF within the French administration.

[20] I studied the media coverage of the UOIF through a systematic analysis of *Le Monde* articles that mentioned the organization (1989–2017). *Le Monde* is one of the most important daily newspapers in France, with a reputation for reliable coverage of political matters. In addition, the journalist in charge of religious issues during most of the period under study, Xavier Ternisien, was very much interested in the topic of Islamic revivalism, having written a book on it and benefiting from good access to the UOIF leadership. I complemented this media content analysis by researching the database Europresse (the largest database of French-speaking regional and national press).

[21] Fieldnotes (discussion with Anwar B.), October 2016, Saint-Denis.

things and witness them firsthand."[22] Most of these community figures were very interested in academic discussions on French Islam, often quoting social scientists in my conversations with them and debating the latest books published on the topic. In addition, they regularly invite scholars to their events, creating spaces for intellectual debates and conversations. Dalil's invitation to present my work in his classroom is but one instance of the (necessarily limited) acceptance I felt.[23] Many of these leaders have pursued university degrees in social sciences (history, sociology, political science) at master's or doctoral level, making them attuned to the tools and practices of a sociological research inquiry.

All in all, these elements attest to their concern for building what they hoped to be "unbiased" discussions with academics (in a context where several scholars and pundits participate in demonization campaigns against their organization, without taking the trouble to interview them or attend their activities). I cannot count the number of unsolicited comments my interlocutors made about their adherence to *laïcité*, their condemnation of terrorism, their strong attachment to Frenchness – all statements that ended up forming the core empirical content of this book. In these instances, I felt that some leaders considered me as a socially privileged witness to their civic virtuousness and regarded my research as an occasion to address misrepresentations about their religion in general and their work in particular.[24] This feeling encouraged me to be particularly self-reflexive in the field but also to take seriously the reflexivity deployed by Muslim actors themselves, whether in the form of books (Oubrou et al. 2009; Oubrou and Lieven 2012; Oubrou and Colombani 2017; Lahlou 2018; Ngazou 2023), public addresses (Alaoui et al. 2005), or unpublished exercises of self-reflexivity and historical accounts.

Their respectability politics also played out in fieldwork dynamics in a separate way: through their deep concerns for educational uplift. In this regard, my research represented another type of opportunity, related to my upper middle-class knowledge of elite educational systems both in France and in the UK. Concretely, this meant that I sometimes endorsed a

[22] Fieldnotes (discussion with Kadir Z.), October 2016, Paris.

[23] My outsider status undoubtedly came with limitations, nurturing distance and distrust. As will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter as well as in Chapter 3, my presence was sometimes perceived as yet another *dispositif* of surveillance. Furthermore, certain spaces remained inaccessible to me, such as the monthly study circles (*ḥalaqāt*) that UOIF members participate in to learn their religion and socialize.

[24] To be sure, actions and discourses observed over a long period of time, in large groups (dozens of students in classrooms, hundreds of worshippers in mosques, thousands of attendees at public gatherings), cannot be reduced to any instrumental performance.

role of educational counselor. Senior members of the organization asked me for advice on behalf of their children, hoping to navigate elite higher education in France (the *classes préparatoires*, the *grandes écoles*) and other opportunities in the UK. Some suggested that I meet their sons or daughters – an approach typical of the middle classes' concern with good education. One example among others of these fieldwork dynamics comes to mind: As I was packing up my belongings after a day attending the UOIF colloquium in Paris, the secretary-general of the organization approached me to introduce his daughter. She was in her second year of undergraduate studies in linguistics in Grenoble and was considering undertaking a graduate degree in the UK. She was looking for insights regarding the British university system.[25] Sometimes, junior UOIF members directly solicited my advice about their educational choices – which bachelor's degree they should pursue or whether I could look at their research proposals. As a matter of fact, UOIF members place enormous value on the acquisition of educational capital as part of their project of community uplift. For them, the integration of Muslim worshippers into French society requires the best degrees and diplomas to unlock access to high-status positions and thus demonstrate the socioeconomic and moral worthiness of Muslims qua citizens.

Fieldwork in Post-Terror-Attacks France

The tense political climate characterizing my fieldwork years put a great deal of pressure on Muslim leaders to engage in respectability politics. In the aftermath of the 2015 terror attacks in Paris (in January with the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting and in November with coordinated attacks across the city) and the 2016 truck attack in Nice, French Muslims in general and UOIF leaders in particular were constantly summoned to provide proof of their civic loyalty (Bounaga 2023). Media and politicians alike required French citizens of the Muslim faith to publicly condemn the attacks and disassociate themselves from any fundamentalist understanding of Islam. Despite tokens of good faith in these directions, the UOIF became increasingly stigmatized in public discussions. The growth in autobiographical accounts by reformed activists, the creation of blogs targeting UOIF members, a smear poster campaign in Paris equating the UOIF with terrorism, and frequent condemnations of the organization by

[25] Fieldnotes (UOIF annual conference, "Crises : Quelles alternatives face aux peurs ? Culture, identité, laïcité"), February 2016, Paris.

politicians precipitated a moral panic that came to surround the UOIF. Political scrutiny culminated during the 2017 presidential campaign, which witnessed the intensification of calls for the organization's dissolution. A vivid episode occurred during a live broadcast debate between the liberal candidate Emmanuel Macron and the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, who accused the former of being "in the hands of UOIF" and "radical Islamists."[26] These heated controversies combined with Muslim leaders' concerns about their public image prompted me to turn what I had initially conceived as a methodological issue – gaining access to an organization that is viewed with suspicion during these troubled times – into the focus of this book, the management of a spoiled identity through respectability politics.

The national security crisis directly impacted fieldwork dynamics, as illustrated by the following anecdote. As I was attending tutorial activities with half a dozen children enrolled in the nearby *collège*, organized by JMF in La Courneuve (north Paris) in October 2015, I looked at two volunteers who were having a discussion a few tables behind me. I must have had an inquisitive expression on my face, since one of them cracked a joke, provoking peals of laughter from the whole group: "Don't worry, Margot, we're just planning an attack on the Élysée Palace [the residence of the French President]!"[27] The resort to humor seems to reflect different processes: the perception of the (white, non-Muslim) researcher as yet another *dispositif* of surveillance, the internalization of their image as a threat to the nation, and the creative resources my interlocutors deploy to come to grips with the associated stress and anxiety. The theatrical enactment of the young terrorist stereotype was a way for them to play with the assumed fears and prejudices of the majority population, as represented by me.[28]

At other times, especially near the fieldwork's end, humor was used to express more trustful relationships while still reflecting the heavy suspicions weighing upon them. As I was invited to present my research to UOIF's administrative council in February 2020, a recent "cartography of Muslim Brotherhood networks in France" had recently been released online, constellating the supposed connections between an eclectic mix of non-Muslim academics, politicians, Muslim scholars, and

[26] Hanan Ben Rhouma, "Non, Emmanuel Macron n'est pas 'entre les mains' de l'UOIF," *SaphirNews*, April 26, 2017, www.saphirnews.com/Non-Emmanuel-Macron-n-est-pas-entre-les-mains-de-l-UOIF_a23794.html.

[27] Fieldnotes (observation of JMF activities), October 2015, La Courneuve.

[28] For similar fieldwork dynamics in Norway, see Jacobsen (2010: 179).

anti-racist activists.[29] Several leaders alluded to this document, ridiculing its groundless accusations and conspiracy-theorist undertones. They also made jokes about the fact that my photograph will probably be added if an updated cartography was to be published – these jokes reflecting the "stickiness" of stigma (Goffman 1963) and the fact that researchers studying their organization were found "guilty by association" in the eyes of hostile (often far-right) observers. It is with these dynamics in mind that the following chapters need to be read.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The standards of civil Islam in secular democracies are largely articulated by extra-community actors (journalists, politicians, government officers, etc.) and are constantly redefined in public conversations. Despite this ever-evolving complexity, I suggest to schematically delineate the contours of civil Islam along six cardinal values: independence from homelands, cooperation against terror, political deference, restricted religious visibility, the embrace of neoliberal tenets, and a color-blind approach to inequalities. Each of the book's chapters inquires into the ways Muslim leaders of the UOIF come to terms with these values.

To begin with, Muslim leaders have to demonstrate credentials of national loyalty in an age of globalization. Suspicions of dual allegiance are widespread in public conversations, rendering Muslims others par excellence. Faced with scrutiny and distrust, my interlocutors stress the importance of *tawṭīn* (permanent settlement) in France and constantly reiterate their claims to belonging. As shown in Chapter 2, "Proving Frenchness," they do so by taking up citizenship and valorizing feelings of national pride but also through various patriotic performances, such as displaying the French flag or joining the French army. Language plays an important part in this process, reflected in the Frenchification of their sermons and in the everyday policing of expressions of belonging.

Muslims' claims to citizenship are directly endangered by terror attacks, which cast a dark shadow on everything Islamic. In a context of increasing securitization of Islam,[30] Chapter 3, "Allaying Suspicions,"

[29] Lieux Communs (collectif), "Cartographie de la galaxie des Frères Musulmans en France," Observatoire des idéologies identitaires [website], December 15, 2023, https://decolonialisme.fr/cartographie-de-la-galaxie-des-freres-musulmans-en-france-version-2-12/.

[30] Defined as the labeling of Muslims as existential threats to social cohesion and national security.

discusses how French Muslims are constructed as a suspect community and how community leaders are prompt to endorse exemplary behavior designed to circumvent the terrorist stigma. Organizing guided tours and open days in mosques is emblematic of this endeavor, alongside cultivating dispositions of approachability and gentleness in face-to-face interactions. Being reflected upon as part of the Islamic tradition of moderation (*wasaṭiyya*), these actions also allow them to counter identification as potential security risks in an age of hypervigilance toward Muslim populations.

The ambition of community leaders to deflect the stigma of the angry and disorderly Muslim is further enacted in local politics. In a context of urban unrest affecting disadvantaged neighborhoods, Muslim leaders are expected to leverage their community credibility to facilitate the integration of migrant-origin populations and keep these neighborhoods quiet. As explored in Chapter 4, "Keeping Order," this is particularly perceptible during episodes of social turmoil, such as the 2001 unrest in Lille or the 2005 riots in France. But beyond times of crisis, this role of social troubleshooters also entails the dissemination an Islamic ethos of responsibility, with the view to transform young worshippers into hardworking individuals, avoiding the pitfalls of idleness, incivility, and drugs.

This ethos of responsibility takes a particular flavor in a context of tight secular constraints. In France, renewed public discussions on *laïcité* since the 1990s consolidated a hard, exclusivist understanding of secularism. Against this backdrop, Muslim leaders of the UOIF stress the need to adapt Islamic rulings to local (French) customs (*ʿurf*) and the importance of private spiritual practices over public ones, exhorting coreligionists to practice discretion and self-restraint. Chapter 5, "Practicing Discreetly," unpacks this imperative to pass unnoticed and shows how it goes hand in hand with the celebration of an "intelligent" Islam against "ignorant" and "simplistic" interpretations. What is at stake here is the restricted visibility of Islam in an age of secularism and fears about religious renewal.

In addition to being discreet, Muslim leaders must show that they are productive, tax-paying citizens contributing to the common good. Chapter 6, "Uplifting the Community," draws the contours of their uplift ideology, which is designed to elevate their socioeconomic conditions and that of their coreligionists. It maps their moral worldviews regarding social deservingness, grounded in the language of Islamic virtues: The centrality of education is predicated upon the Qurʾanic injunction *iqraʾ* ("read"), the search for professional accomplishment is understood as a duty of *iḥsān* (excellence), and the importance of behavioral exemplarity

is reasoned in reference to *ādāb* (good manners) and *akhlāq* (ethical conduct). Such principles are consistent with contemporary definitions of social worth in an age of neoliberal values.

Finally, the uplift ideology of UOIF leaders directly impacts the ways in which they respond to stigmatization. Chapter 7, "Facing Hostility Graciously," unpacks the emotional work of self-regulation that they advocate in the face of adversities in a color-blind republic. In the context of rising Islamophobia, French Muslim leaders encourage their coreligionists to react politely and graciously to stigma, stressing the ethical value of nonconfrontational responses. In addition, they distance themselves from contentious means of action and chastise what they consider a victim mentality. Once again, their approach is primarily guided by pious considerations, with the view to practice the Prophetic model of patience and perseverance (*ṣabr*). Yet it tends to obscure power structures, with Muslim worshippers being taught to police their behavior rather than question persistent inequalities.

The final chapter of the book, Chapter 8, "Respectable Citizens in Uncertain Environments," teases out the empirical and theoretical threads of respectability politics in the French Muslim context. It stresses the ways in which this type of politics operates as a *reactive*, *embodied*, *gendered*, *racialized*, and *class-layered* tactic of community advancement, containing both *conservative* and *emancipatory* impulses. It further reflects on the relative failure of respectability politics, which falls short of its promise to bring the full exercise of citizenship to French Muslims. The chapter concludes by discussing the importance of breaking from the insularity of Islam scholarship and opening a transatlantic conversation about the role of ethics and religion in (quiet) minority politics. The ambition of the book, then, is to look beyond the Muslim case and draw parallels with other minority citizens, whether Black elites in the US or European Jews. It examines how these groups have resorted to inconspicuous religiosity and social uplift to advance their own conditions and how such stories demonstrate the intricate workings of power in situations of subjection.